

Alcohol Packaging As a Promotional Tool: A Focus Group Study With Young Adult Drinkers in Scotland

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ABSTRACT. Objective: Little research has been conducted on consumer perceptions of alcohol packaging as a marketing tool. The aim of this study was to explore how young adults view and engage with alcohol packaging. **Method:** Eight focus groups were conducted in Glasgow (Scotland) with current drinkers ($n = 50$), segmented by age (18–24, 25–35), gender (female, male), and social grade (ABC1, C2DE). Participants were shown, allowed to handle, and asked about a range of alcoholic products. **Results:** Five main themes emerged from the data. The first was the ubiquity of alcohol packaging, with frequent exposure reported in different settings, such as shops and drinking venues, and via marketing. The second was appeal, with pack graphics (e.g., color), structure (e.g., shape, size), and promotions (e.g., gifts, limited editions)

allowing alcohol packs to catch attention, enabling products to stand out on shelves, and helping to create product and brand liking, interest, and choice. Third, alcohol packaging was frequently associated with specific occasions and activities. Fourth, alcohol packaging informed perceptions of product-consumer targeting, suitability, and intended drinker profiles. Fifth, alcohol packaging also engaged nonvisual senses (e.g., touch, sound, smell), guiding expectations of product taste and palatability. **Conclusions:** For young adult drinkers in Scotland, alcohol packaging can capture attention, create appeal, and help shape perceptions of the product, drinker, and drinking experience. (*J. Stud. Alcohol Drugs*, 83, 565–573, 2022)

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS aim to forge a strong connection between consumers and brands (Purves, 2017), with packaging an increasingly important means of doing so (LaMarco, 2019). Product packaging is a valuable means of communication for most consumer goods (Ford et al., 2012), being used to capture attention, identify brands, and differentiate products within and between brands (Gómez et al., 2015; Wells et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2017). A core strength of packaging is its accessibility and visibility at the point of purchase (Underwood et al., 2001), helping to showcase the product (Rundh, 2013). Indeed, the pack is often consumers' first encounter with the product and can set expectations of its contents through colors, images, symbols, words, shapes, sizes, formats, and labels (Durgee, 2003; Gelici-Zeko et al., 2013; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Laeng et al., 2016; Langley et al., 2011; Rocchi & Stefani, 2006).

Packaging enables multisensory communication with the consumer and is often used to produce individual and social meaning via pack cues (de Luca & Penco, 2006). For example, alcohol packaging can be used to convey a luxurious, aspirational lifestyle (Diouf, 2014), target health-conscious consumers by promoting low alcoholic and calorific content (Lingle, 2017), or target environmentally conscious consum-

ers by using logos designed to increase awareness of corporate social responsibility (e.g., animal conservation; Barber, 2010; Packaging Strategies, 2017; Rokka & Uusitalo, 2008). Consumers may also associate certain colors and patterns used on packaging with brand identity and gender suitability (Madden et al., 2000; Sara, 1990).

Packaging is crucial for communicating information about, as well as creating interest in, the product (Ampuero & Vila, 2006; Moodie & Hastings, 2011; Wyrwa & Barska, 2017). Given that the first “taste” is often with the eye (Mueller & Lockshin, 2008), packaging can influence palatability ratings without the consumer tasting the product (Gates et al., 2007). It can also influence shelf standout, purchasing decisions, customer satisfaction, and consumers' “lived” experiences of products (Ford et al., 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Löfgren & Witell, 2005; Merdian et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2018; Schifferstein et al., 2013; Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Alcohol packaging—which is generally but not always present at the point of purchase (e.g., restaurant menu options)—can play a key role in adolescents' drinking behavior by influencing appeal, product trial, and choice (Morey et al., 2017; Purves et al., 2018), and it may influence purchase and consumption among adults (Barber & Almanza, 2006; Kersbergen & Field, 2017).

In the United Kingdom, alcohol packaging is legally required to include volume, strength/alcohol by volume, and presence of common allergens (UK Parliament, 2021), with other product and health-related information (e.g., nutritional information, health messaging) self-regulated by alcohol companies and no legal restrictions regarding on-pack promotions, single-serve product availability, or the

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display of alcohol in retail outlets (e.g., supermarkets). It has been argued that self-regulation enables alcohol companies to use packaging to communicate health misinformation and for marketing purposes (O'Brien et al., 2021). The Portman Group (2019), an alcohol producer-funded organization that monitors the packaging and promotion of alcohol products in the United Kingdom, has been criticized for serving industry interests, undermining public health, and ineffectively regulating alcohol marketing (Alcohol Concern, 2018; Hawkins & McCambridge, 2021; McCambridge et al., 2014). Packs in the United Kingdom are not commensurate with potential harms and do not adequately inform consumers, let alone change drinking behaviors (Alcohol Health Alliance UK, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). Messaging is suboptimal and of limited relevance to consumers (e.g., "Please drink responsibly"), with small fonts and warning logos (e.g., regarding pregnancy) usually on the back of the product (Jones et al., 2021; Petticrew et al., 2016). Despite a significant increase in alcohol-specific deaths in the United Kingdom in 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2021), alcohol packaging remains a versatile marketing tool.

The role of packaging has been widely studied for nonalcoholic beverages (Joubert & Poalses, 2012; Maher, 2012) and products with comparable health risks to alcohol, such as tobacco (Moodie & Hastings, 2010). For alcohol, in contrast, studies typically focus on traditional and digital alcohol marketing (Critchlow et al., 2016; Farrell & Gordon, 2012). The few studies that have explored alcohol packaging as a promotional tool have been conducted with children and adolescents (e.g., Jones, 2011; Jones & Reis, 2011; Morey et al., 2017; Purves et al., 2018), and although those are key populations, so too are adults, the legitimate and main targets for such communications (Critchlow & Moodie, 2021).

To address these research gaps and to better understand the influence of packaging on purchasing choice and consumption, we explored young adult drinkers' perceptions of alcohol packaging as a promotional tool, how it is used to create appeal and attract consumers, and which, if any, pack features consumers consider important.

Method

Design and sample

Eight focus groups were conducted in Glasgow (Scotland) in September 2019 with 50 young adult past-month drinkers. The groups were segmented by gender (female, male), age (18–24, 25–35), and social grade (ABC1, C2DE; Table 1), as participants with similar characteristics are usually more comfortable engaging in group discussions (Greenwood et al., 2014). Social grade was categorized according to the occupation of the person in the household with the greatest income (National Readership Survey, n.d.), an established

TABLE 1. Age, gender, social grade, number of participants, and median units in the past 7 days

Group	Age	Gender	Social grade	Participants ^a	Units
1	18–24	Female	ABC1	7	12
2	18–24	Female	C2DE	7	14 ^b
3	25–35	Female	ABC1	6	16
4	25–35	Female	C2DE	5	8
5	18–24	Male	ABC1	7	16
6	18–24	Male	C2DE	6	13
7	25–35	Male	ABC1	6	15.5
8	25–35	Male	C2DE	6	9.5

^aOf the 56 young adults recruited, 50 (89%) participated in the focus groups; ^btwo participants had not consumed alcohol in the past 7 days.

classification system in the United Kingdom with Grades A, B, and C1 indicating higher- and middle-class groups and C2, D, and E working-class groups. Focus groups are appropriate when seeking to allow participants to interact with, and discuss, particular stimuli, in this case alcohol packaging. We concentrated on young adults, as alcohol producers regularly target this age group when (re)designing packaging (Bell, 2020; Boggis, 2008; Clark, 2008). They are also a key group for public health, given the high levels of hazardous drinking (Patton & Boniface, 2016), yet they are somewhat overlooked in alcohol marketing research (Critchlow & Moodie, 2021). There was a mix of drinking behaviors within and between groups according to units consumed in the past week (National Health Service, 2018). Although almost all participants ($n = 48$) had drunk alcohol in the past week (Table 1), the number of units consumed by past-week drinkers ranged from 2 to 80, with a median of 13.5 units ($SD = 13.64$), which is within the UK Chief Medical Officers' (2016) low-risk weekly drinking guidelines (i.e., below 14 units).

Procedure

Participants were recruited, face-to-face, in Greater Glasgow by a market researcher using a brief recruitment questionnaire that captured demographic and drinking information (see Supplemental A). (Supplemental material appears as an online-only addendum to this article on the journal's website.) Potential participants were asked, "When was the last time you drank alcohol?" Those who had consumed any alcohol in the past 30 days were considered current drinkers, with those answering "never" or "more than 30 days ago" ineligible. At recruitment participants were informed about the study and potential ethical concerns (e.g., confidentiality, anonymity, right to withdraw) and, before each group (all moderated by the first author [DJJ]), were asked to provide consent. It was explained at the start of each group that all contributions were valued and encouraged, and that participants could refrain from answering any questions. Groups lasted 93 minutes on average (shortest 90 minutes, longest



FIGURE 1. Alcohol product packaging: Beers/cider, wines, spirits

99 minutes) and were audio-recorded. A semi-structured discussion guide was used to address the research aims and to ensure commonality across groups.

Each group explored alcohol packaging as a means of promotion, and subsequently health messaging on alcohol packaging, which is reported elsewhere (Jones et al., 2021). Participants were asked where they had seen alcohol and alcohol packaging, whether they had ever been drawn to an alcohol product by its packaging, whether they could recall products that stood out in off-licenses or supermarkets, and whether they ever kept an empty alcohol container. Participants were then shown, and allowed to handle, nine branded alcohol products in sets of three: beers/cider, wines, and spirits (Figure 1). Products were used to reflect key packaging design elements used by alcohol companies (i.e., pack graphics, pack structure, promotional packaging, and “green” packaging) and prompt discussion. The selected products did not display prominent health messaging, which is reflective of alcohol products marketed in the United Kingdom (Alcohol Health Alliance UK, 2020; Petticrew et al., 2016), and ranked highly in the United Kingdom’s 100 top-selling alcohol brands (Woolfson, 2019), ensuring brand familiarity: Stella Artois (no. 1); Smirnoff (no. 2); Gordon’s (no. 4); Strongbow (no. 7); Famous Grouse (no. 10); Barefoot (no. 12); Kopparberg (no. 13); Blossom Hill (no. 20); Wolf Blass (no. 39). Within each of the three sets, participants were asked to focus on the packaging and discuss which, if any, grabbed their attention, what their favorite pack was, and whether they associated packs with specific occasions.

Participants were debriefed at the end of the groups, given contact details for Drinkline (alcohol support), and given £30 shopping vouchers for their time. Ethical approval was granted by the General University Ethics Panel at University of Stirling (GUEP 668R).

Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed by professional transcribers. Thematic analysis was conducted as per Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and familiarity by one author (DJ), then examined by two authors (DJ and CM) to identify initial thematic codes. Codes were developed inductively, based on initial observations that were summarized into conceptual categories and gradually refined and linked to other conceptual categories using NVivo 12 Pro. Codes were then collated into potential themes by the first author (DJ) and reviewed by two co-authors (CM and RP) to create a thematic framework. Five key themes were defined and refined: the ubiquity of alcohol packaging; appeal of alcohol packaging; associations between packaging, occasions, and activities; perceptions of product-consumer targeting, suitability, and intended drinker profiles; and packaging and nonvisual senses (i.e., taste, touch, sound, smell). These themes were examined to identify meaningful patterns across the groups. Representative quotations are provided in the Results section to illustrate key themes (see Supplemental B for additional quotations). Differences by age, gender, or social grade are identified in the text.

Results

The ubiquity of alcohol packaging

The consensus view was that alcohol packaging was ubiquitous. Participants discussed seeing it in different settings, most typically shops and drinking venues, and via marketing, particularly advertising. They frequently recalled seeing alcohol packaging in a range of media platforms, with most reporting exposure in television and movies, social media, and the Internet, as well as at social occasions (e.g., parties, festivals) and in public (e.g., litter).

Appeal of alcohol packaging

Although some participants paid little attention to alcohol packaging, instead placing greater importance on other factors (e.g., taste, price), most recalled packs that stood out in shops and were considered appealing for being different, interesting, or aesthetically pleasing—for example, “I’ve never felt inclined to go to the ones that don’t look nice” (18–24 male, ABC1). Some participants mentioned purchasing alcohol products based solely on pack appeal (e.g., “I don’t actually like beer, but I bought it [Brewdog] specifically because I liked the packaging”; 18–24 male, ABC1).

Pack design

Pack design was central to appeal, with participants discussing how pack graphics (e.g., color, graphical design) and structure (e.g., shape, size, format, opening mechanism) help build appeal, with on-pack promotions (e.g., gifts, prizes, limited editions) also shaping these perceptions. For pack graphics, several participants commented on pack designs they liked, but color was most likely to capture attention—for example, “Color is what attracts people, it’s all about colors” (25–35 male, C2DE)—and create appeal, being mentioned frequently in all groups.

Pack structure

Pack structure also influenced appeal, with most participants drawn to “sleek” or “distinctive” shapes and able to recall and differentiate alcohol products by pack shape alone. Size was also important for many participants, with larger packs (e.g., Budweiser, Wolf Blass) considered more cost-effective and preferable when intending to consume a large quantity of alcohol (e.g., “I would pick the Budweiser because there’s more”; 18–24 male, ABC1). Smaller, “quick, easy, grab and go” (18–24 female, ABC1) packs like the Barefoot can were thought to enable, and encourage, consumption in different public settings (e.g., on trains, at concerts) and help to avoid unwanted attention from police, security personnel, and others (e.g., “I think it would be easier to hide that you were drinking”; 18–24 female, C2DE).

Pack format, green packaging, and opening/closing mechanisms

Pack format supplemented appeal, with some participants expressing positive views of different types of primary (e.g., cocktail pouches, boxed wine, mini kegs) and secondary packaging (e.g., presentation boxes, cases, and sleeves). Although there were fewer comments about pack materials, several participants were aware of, and liked, green packaging initiatives, such as the Stella Artois bottle made of 75% recycled glass or Carlsberg’s “Snap Packs,” in which cans are

glued together instead of being attached by plastic rings to reduce waste and harm to animals. Several participants discussed the appeal of opening mechanisms, with some older (25–35 years) ABC1 men attracted to unusual openings, such as the Grolsch swing tops and Budweiser twist tops, as they circumvent the need for bottle openers. In contrast, having wines or spirits in a ring-pulled can (e.g., Barefoot) was viewed unfavorably because it was thought to make it a less distinct experience and to require consumption at that point (e.g., “You can’t close it up again, so you have to drink it”; 18–24 female, C2DE).

On-pack promotions: Gifts, prizes, and sponsorships

On-pack promotions contributed to appeal, shelf standout, and product choice. Although most participants ignored or failed to notice gifts and prizes on alcohol packaging, several were attracted by them, recalling different gifts (e.g., glasses, clothes, chocolates), prizes (e.g., music streaming subscriptions, festival tickets, holidays), and entry methods (e.g., websites, QR codes), all thought “to try and convince you to buy it” (25–35 female, ABC1). On-pack sponsorships (e.g., sports, festivals, television shows) appealed to some participants, depending on the sponsorship content.

Price marking

With respect to price promotions, some suggested that price marks on packs made products more desirable—for example, “It [the price mark] makes it appealing because it’s cheap” (18–24 female, C2DE). However, most felt that price marks, which they recalled being displayed on a number of brands (e.g., Dragon Soop, Glen’s, Lambrini, Tennent’s), were indicative of inferior products (e.g., “It was as if they [alcohol companies] were advertising something cheap, that was their catch”; 18–24 male, ABC1).

Limited editions

Limited-edition packs were considered eye-catching and an incentive by several participants, thought to encourage trial, collection, and upcycling (e.g., for holding candles, flowers)—for example, “I think you would be more inclined to try something if it was different” (25–35 female, ABC1). Participants recalled many limited-edition packs (e.g., Absolut, Cîroc, Disaronno, Glenfiddich, Grey Goose, Johnny Walker). These included Tennent’s “Lager Lovelies,” featuring a “woman of the month on the tins” (25–35 male, ABC1), and “Alphabet Packs,” which displayed “a different selection of letters and Scottish slang terms” (25–35 female, C2DE). It was suggested that people who spelled words with the bottles and posted the images online helped gain the company attention: “It was an easy way to get them [Tennent’s] shared on social media” (18–24 male, C2DE).

Retaining empty packs

Most participants had retained empty packs for display, upcycling, or collection. Participants tended to keep nice, expensive, or “cool” empty bottles (e.g., Belvedere Vodka, Grey Goose Vodka, Hendrick’s Gin, Isle of Harris Gin), whether for graphical (e.g., color), structural (e.g., shape, size, format), or promotional (e.g., gifts, limited editions) cues. Some empty bottles were mentioned frequently (e.g., Crystal Head Vodka), with participants recalling those received as gifts (e.g., for special birthdays), kept by friends and family members, or reused in hospitality venues as water containers, candle holders, or centerpieces.

Associations between packaging, occasions, and activities

All groups frequently associated packaging with specific occasions and activities, such as Smirnoff and Gordon’s for socializing (e.g., for nights out); Budweiser for watching football at home and at parties; Strongbow and Blossom Hill for festivals, outdoor drinking in the summer, drinking before going out, or “just getting drunk” (18–24 female, C2DE); Wolf Blass and Baileys for special occasions and gifting (e.g., Christmas, dinner parties); and Barefoot for traveling and public settings (e.g., “Drinking it on the train to Edinburgh or something like that”; 18–24 female, ABC1).

Perceptions of product-consumer targeting, suitability, and intended drinker profiles

Unprompted, participants used packaging cues to assess product-consumer targeting and suitability, with some inferring drinker characteristics via packs. Most were clear about who was being targeted by the packaging and which products were appropriate for different ages and genders, with the suggestion that “it’s not rocket science who they’re [alcohol companies] trying to target” (25–35 male, C2DE). For instance, the consensus was that the Wolf Blass cricket promotion and the football sponsorship and prize promotion on Budweiser were “targeted at men” (25–35 female, ABC1), with the latter suitable for “boys that watch football” (18–24 female, ABC1), whereas the Gordon’s Pink Gin bottle and beauty gift on Blossom Hill were “targeted at women” (18–24 female, C2DE) and “young girls at college and university who are concerned about their looks and make up” (18–24 male, ABC1). Bright (e.g., Dragon Soop, MD, Venom) and price-marked packs (e.g., Strongbow) were thought to grab attention, create appeal, and encourage purchase among younger people particularly.

Participants evaluated intended drinker characteristics via packaging cues, with the cricket sponsorship shown on the label of Wolf Blass suggesting it was for “bourgeois” or “rich” people, whereas the “hip flask” (18–24 female, ABC1) shape and smaller pack size for Famous Grouse was

associated with elderly men—for example, “Because it’s a half bottle, it’s like an old man has it in his jacket, drinking it like an alky (alcoholic)” (25–35 female, ABC1). Several younger (18–24) ABC1 participants preferred to drink and be seen with products perceived to be more acceptable by, and for, their sociodemographic.

Packaging and nonvisual senses: Taste, touch, sound, and smell

Packs that participants were shown, able to recall, or had previously purchased elicited perceptions of the product. Several used pack appearance as an indicator for taste and palatability—for instance, expecting certain drinks to be fruity, light, or refreshing or to “taste nice from the packaging” (18–24 female, ABC1). Others avoided products that they thought would not taste nice because of the packaging (e.g., “It doesn’t look nice, so you probably feel you don’t want to drink it”; 18–24 male, ABC1). Some participants also spoke positively about the feeling of touching some packs—for example, “It’s [Barefoot] nice to hold” (25–35 female, C2DE)—or the enjoyment of hearing the “pop” of opening a bottle of Jura, whereas one participant was put off by the anticipated smell: “I can smell that Blossom Hill from over here; I hate cheap wine”; 25–35 female, ABC1).

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that the packaging of alcohol products is an important marketing communications vehicle, as it is for other fast-moving consumer goods (e.g., packaged food; Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Suzianti et al., 2015). We extend the nascent literature by exploring how young adult drinkers, key targets for alcohol marketing (Critchlow & Moodie, 2021), respond to alcohol packaging, finding that a combination of pack elements helps products attract consumers, stand out against competitors, and build enduring impressions of brands and the people who consume them. We also found that alcohol packaging can influence product expectations (Copeland et al., 2007; De Luca & Penco, 2006; Gislason et al., 2020; Spence & Velasco, 2018; Sugrue & Dando, 2018), with a positive relationship between pack appeal and palatability ratings (Gates et al., 2007; Jones & Reis, 2011). That some participants reported purchasing products they would not normally buy solely because of the packaging, and most retained empty alcohol packs to reuse, collect, and display at home for aesthetic reasons, is testament to the appeal of some alcohol packs.

Participants reported regular exposure to alcohol packaging, echoing previous work with children (Chambers et al., 2019) and highlighting the reach of packaging. The retail environment is a particularly important channel for alcohol companies to showcase their products, with most participants easily able to recall packs that captured their attention

in shops. By increasing shelf standout, distinctive alcohol packaging can create a competitive advantage and increase sales (de Bruijn et al., 2012; Rundh, 2009). We found that pack graphics and structure were central to consumer attraction (Barber & Almanza, 2006; Kersbergen & Field, 2017). Pack color is the key graphical cue in promoting products (Mohebbi, 2014; Spence & Velasco, 2018), and in all groups color significantly influenced attention, appeal, and brand recognition. Pack structure (including shape, size, opening method, and materials) was frequently discussed, with certain packs, such as those with novel shapes, thought to increase attractiveness and trial. Several participants were drawn to environmentally friendly alcohol packaging, recalling and supporting sustainability initiatives, although this subject was discussed less often. Green packaging, which particularly appeals to environmentally conscious consumers (Barber, 2010; Ferrara et al., 2020), affords alcohol companies the opportunity to capitalize on the growing desire for more sustainable packs (e.g., less glass, reduced plastic) while simultaneously promoting corporate social responsibility (International Wine & Spirit Research, 2019).

On-pack promotions appealed to some participants who were attracted by gifts and prizes, recalling numerous on-pack giveaways, entry methods, and seasonal gift packs. Although most were not interested in on-pack (or price) promotions, past research has found that desirable free gifts can persuade young people to purchase a greater quantity of alcohol and products that they would not usually consume (Jones & Smith, 2011), and price marking can increase sales (Stead et al., 2020). As a scarcity product tactic, limited-edition packs are another form of promotion, although they are overlooked in the alcohol literature. Limited-edition packs were recalled by most participants and were thought to encourage purchase and collection because of special pack designs and limited availability. Limited-edition packs are used by marketers to create shelf impact, attract attention, increase appeal, sell novelty to consumers, mark special occasions, and maintain brand engagement (Barraclough & Gleeson, 2017; Couch et al., 2019; Dörnyei, 2020; Roper & Parker, 2006), with limited-edition cigarette packs considered more attractive and attention grabbing than regular packs (Gallopel-Morvan et al., 2012).

Participants associated alcohol packaging with specific occasions and activities (e.g., socializing, watching football, outdoor drinking). Alcohol is considered a social lubricant (Fairbairn & Sayette, 2014), with it suggested that alcohol producers attract customers by creating packaging associated with special events and drinks suitable for different occasions and activities (de Bruijn et al., 2012). We found some support for this assertion, with a small can of wine (Barefoot) thought to allow for discreet public drinking (e.g., at a concert) and to help avoid unwanted attention (e.g., by police). Convenience of alcohol packaging, such as ease of carrying and concealment, has been found to influence

young people's product preferences (Galloway et al., 2007; Jones & Reis, 2011). We also found that participants associated alcohol packs with different personality and lifestyle attributes, with packs able to convey individual and social messages regarding appearance and acceptability (Purves et al., 2018).

Participants associated alcohol packaging with certain drinker profiles and characteristics, inferring product-consumer targeting and suitability (Morey et al., 2017; Purves et al., 2018). Alcohol packaging has become increasingly gendered (Atkinson et al., 2019), with all groups considering the Budweiser box targeted at men and several products (Barefoot, Blossom Hill, and Gordon's) targeted at women. Budweiser has strong male associations and is targeted at male football fans (Purves et al., 2018), whereas female-oriented slim packaging can increase consumption of beer and appeal of cigarettes among women (de Bruijn et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2016). Dragon Soop (alcoholic energy drink) was frequently recalled as a product that stood out because of its colorful packaging and was thought to appeal to, and be targeted toward, young (including underage) people. There are parallels with other alcohol products (e.g., alcopops) that often come in small and colorful bottles and are considered to appeal to youth (Gates et al., 2007; Jones, 2011; Jones & Reis, 2011; Morey et al., 2017; Mosher & Johnsson, 2005).

Our findings may help to inform future research and policies. Including prominent warnings on packs could reduce appeal, increase awareness of alcohol-related risks, and support a decrease in consumption (Jones et al., 2021; Vallance et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020); a missed opportunity to ameliorate higher rates of at-home drinking and relapse among drinkers in recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic (Critchlow et al., 2021; Thomas, 2021). However, the significant promotional role of packaging requires further consideration, as attractive features (e.g., design, structure) may limit the effectiveness of warnings. Plain packaging for tobacco can reduce pack appeal and misperceptions of harm while increasing warning saliency (Hammond, 2010; Moodie et al., 2021a, 2021b). There is a dearth of research on alcohol, with limited evidence suggesting that plain packaging could reduce product-based and consumer-based ratings and increase the salience of health messaging (Al-Hamdani & Smith, 2017; Dimova & Mitchell, 2021).

Regarding limitations, focus group findings are not generalizable. While participants were encouraged to engage with topics honestly, and appeared to do so, some responses may have been affected by social desirability bias. Although participants discussed their thoughts on, and experiences of, alcohol packaging, the effects of marketing are often subtle and may be driven by subconscious processes (Stautz et al., 2016), meaning that some may have underestimated the influence of packaging as a marketing tool. Forced exposure to alcohol packs is not as natural as it would be in bars or retail outlets. Similar to tobacco research (Guillory et al., 2020),

future studies could explore exposure to alcohol packaging using virtual shopping experiences.

In conclusion, alcohol packaging is a key marketing communications vehicle that can elicit expectations, influence purchasing decisions, and encourage purchase. As expressed by young adult drinkers in Scotland, alcohol packaging conveys messages of consumer-product suitability and acceptability, creating enduring brand impressions and reinforcing the perception that alcohol is a desirable product via pack structure, graphics, and promotions.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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